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Her Majesty's Signet

On 5th July 2012 Her Majesty The Queen installed her grandson, His Royal Highness Prince William, Earl of Strathearn, a Knight of the Thistle at St Giles Cathedral. As is customary on such occasions, Her Majesty and the royal party processed to and from the Signet Library. The Queen has visited the Signet Library regularly during her reign. To mark the Diamond Jubilee, KAREN BASTON explains the history of the WS Society's relationship with the monarchy.

The WS Society's history is deeply intertwined with that of the monarchy. The Signet and its functions come to us from the medieval Kings of Scotland. The Society has demonstrated its loyalty in a variety of ways since its official foundation in the sixteenth century. These expressions have taken forms beyond the important function of keeping the Signet. Writers to the Signet have raised regiments, participated in ceremonies, and greeted monarchs during their visits to Edinburgh.

The use of a signet ring to demonstrate royal authority goes back to the 1300s in Scotland. Robert I and his son David II both used a ring to seal official documents and one of them had it engraved with the arms of the King of Scotland. The Signet was no longer a ring by the early fifteenth century and it was kept by a clerk. This Keeper of the Signet had great political importance since the use of the Signet was connected with the will of the king. The Keeper of the Signet became a royal secretary and member of state in 1444. A group of writers emerged thereafter to assist the king and his council and by the time the College of Justice came into being in 1532 these writers were already organised into a guild. The Society of Writers to His Majesty's Signet became official in 1594 when James VI's secretary, Sir Richard Cockburn of Clerkington, granted a commission to the Keeper of the Signet and eighteen Writers.

The Society's minutes record some of the various ways its members

have honoured successive kings and queens. Whether fighting in battles or delivering loyal addresses, Writers to the Signet have supported their monarch. In celebration of our current Queen's Diamond Jubilee this year we look at some examples of the close royal relationship from the late seventeenth century to the present.

Writers to the Signet joined advocates and "certain clerks of session" on 13th June 1679 to raise a regiment "for his majesty's service" against those "who have risen up in rebelloun [sic] in the West against his majestie". Sir William Sharp of Stoneyhill, keeper of his majesty's signet, and Hugh Wallace, WS were chosen as lieutenants. The Battle of Bothwell Brig ended the alarm but the Society, which had paid a third of the cost of raising the regiment, was keen to know where the colours and liveries were to be stored so that they could "be made forthcoming when use sall [sic] be of them upon any future occasion".

The same year saw a visit to Scotland from James, duke of York (later James VII) as the king's high commissioner when members of the Society donned their ceremonial gowns in honour of the occasion.

Although the Society's minutes do not discuss the momentous events of 1688-1689 and the resulting change of monarch from Stuart to Orange, the Society warned masters to look after their excitable apprentices after rioting occurred when James VII established a Roman Catholic chapel at Holyrood Palace in 1688. The minutes are then quiet because the Signet was shut from July, when the king and the Scottish Parliament entered into a dispute about which had the right to appoint the Lords of Session, to October, when the new king William of Orange arrived in Britain. On 18th April 1696 the Society declared its loyalty to William's "most sacred person and government" and to the protestant religion while expressing its distaste for "the late king James and the pretended prince of Wales and all their agents".

The Jacobite uprisings saw Society members on both sides of the conflicts. The Society itself remained loyal to the Hanoverian kings each time. Members were advised in 1715 to "take care what persons they take into their chambers as prentices or servants, and that they should entertain none but those who should be well affected to the government, and make no disturbance in the place". Nevertheless, a non-practising member of the Society, Charles Chalmers of Portlethin, died at Sheriffmuir while fighting for the Pretender.

The Society's minutes are again quiet about the events surrounding the Forty-five. The accounts were given and the Signet office was put in order. That the accounts are nearly the only thing mentioned is interesting: the Society's treasurer, fiscal, and substitute keeper had joined the Jacobite forces to act as fund raiser and treasurer for Bonnie Prince Charlie's army. Sir John Hay of Restalrig WS raised £5,500 from Glasgow merchants for the cause but, despite his experience as a treasurer for the Society, proved not to be up to the challenge of financially managing an army. Hay fled to France after Culloden. Another member, Mr Colquhoun Grant WS played a notable role on the Jacobite side at the Battle of Prestonpans and was honoured by Charles at his first levee at Holyrood.

The Society joined the rest of the College of Justice to wait on the victorious Duke of Cumberland in 1746. The Lords of Session were "resolved to wait on his royal highness in their formalities, attended by their clerks, the advocates and writers to the signet" and the Society agreed. But the Society had a problem: what were the "formalities" of the WS Society? The Keeper looked into the matter. The legal profession had been required to use gowns since an act of parliament of 1609 and the Society had worn gowns of some sort to greet James, Duke of York as the king's representative in 1679. By the mid-eighteenth century, the Society's legal dress code was in abeyance: no one even remembered what colour the gowns had been in 1679. It was clear that gowns were required to meet the Duke as the king's representative and the Keeper left a gown in the Society's hall as a pattern. Furthermore the new gowns were to be black since it was deemed more suitable than red and they were to be made of "Scots shalloon", a type of woollen material. The creation of the new gowns demonstrated loyalty since, in addition to honouring the Duke of Cumberland during his visit, it promoted Scottish industry and showed a willingness to put the events of the rebellion in the past. The Society went further, too. Later in the year the members passed a motion to promote the manufacture of woollen cloth by agreeing that all members "should appear dressed in the same against their next general meeting in June". The selection of materials was more than an expression of fashion. The clothing part of the Society's "formalities" remained woollen until 1901 when they were replaced by silk. The Society also added a baton for its officer in 1746.

The Society continued to offer support for military ventures. The Lord Provost of Edinburgh asked for the Society's support in 1778 "for raising a regiment for his majesty's service in America". The meeting of 19th January responded unanimously that "it is the duty of all his majesty's good subjects to testify, on this very important occasion, their loyalty and attachment to his majesty's person and government, and their zeal for the honour and dignity of the nation". The Society pledged five hundred guineas to raise a regiment to fight for the king and raised the funds quickly via a voluntary tax on all letters passing the Signet.

Members of the Society continued

to offer their service and support for the military in the next centuries, reflecting the Society's enduring loyalty to monarch and country.

When George IV visited Scotland in 1822, the WS Society planned how best to greet him. A committee was appointed "for the purpose of considering the most suitable means of testifying the sentiments of dutiful and affectionate loyalty towards his majesty's sacred person". The committee decided that "a dutiful and loyal address be presented to his majesty by the Society" by the Keeper of the Signet, the Deputy Keeper, and fifteen members of the Society. The hall and recently completed library were to be put "in a proper condition for his majesty's reception, in case it shall be his majesty's pleasure to inspect them". To make a royal visit more likely, the Society also took care "to intimate to the lord provost their willingness to grant the use of their hall for the accommodation of his majesty and the distinguished persons who may be invited to partake of the civic feast". After the visit, the minutes report that "the Society's offer of the hall having been accepted, it was used as the general drawing-room at the entertainment given to his majesty on Saturday 24th August". The Upper Library, then still owned by the Advocates, greatly impressed the king who called it "the most beautiful room I have ever seen".

The accession of Queen Victoria prompted a display of loyalty in 1837. Members of the Society met in the outer house and organised themselves in order of seniority so that they could process "in their gowns" to the Royal Exchange to hear the official proclamation. They then processed to Castle Hill for a second proclamation. Fifty years later, the Society celebrated Victoria's Golden Jubilee by installing a stained glass window in the Upper Library. The design includes both the royal arms and the arms of the Society.

The special relationship between the Society and the head of state continues to the present day. The story of that relationship – following the journey of the Signet from private seal of the Stewart dynasty to symbol of the state in modern Scotland – is in microcosm Scotland's story. And so will it continue.